The *Trumpeter*
ISSN: 0832-6193
Volume 21, Number 2 (2005)

What Kind of Democracy?

1996AK

Arne Naess

There is substantial agreement within the environmental movement that there is no better kind of government and society than a democracy. Authoritarian and dictatorial kinds of government are ruled out. To be sure, conditions in some democracies might deteriorate to such an extent that there is a real threat that the authoritarian forms of government and society will come to be. I think that such a possibility is remote. There are presently many kinds of democracy and, with minor changes, they can adapt as necessary to meet demands to lower environmental impacts. However, there are "doomsday prophets" who think that uninhibited economic expansion could require drastic laws to be imposed, whatever the contrary opinion of the majority of people. In all democracies, regardless of kind, there has to be access to accurate information. This becomes more difficult in so-called advanced nations, since, in many, the control of mass media tends to be in the hands of large private firms whose interests might not be consistent with the basic requirements and principles of democracy.

I use the phrase "kind of democracy" in a wide sense, so that I can talk about various kinds and subkinds of democracy. There are many forms of government. We could call democracy, in the most general sense, a form of government by the people that protects individual rights and community well being. But at a more specific, concrete level, given demands and differences in ecosystem and so on, we have the gift of many varieties of democracy to discuss. Theorists of democracy who are concerned about the ecological crisis are questioning whether the present subkinds of democracy are the best suited for the immense tasks ahead that are required to cope with this crisis.

Many seem to think that democracy is the best way to govern ourselves; but how can popular democracies cope with crises that might not be acknowledged by their leaders and mainstream media? And when a crisis becomes severe, how can leaders react without centralizing control? This

process happens, as we have seen recently, with nations that go on a war footing. Civil rights and other liberties can be compromised, local control lost. What kinds of democracies are necessary, and more specifically for me, what about the kind of democracy we have in Norway? Is our kind of democracy fit to meet the challenges ahead?

Some pessimism about the outlook for significant change of ecological policies may, in part, be due to the tacit assumption that nothing can or will change in the way that democracies work today. For many of us, it is profitable to study changes contemplated by authors specializing in this topic. In what follows, I will concentrate on the work by John S. Dryzek as it is presented in his book, *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy, and Political Science*.[1] He writes:

> Discursive democracy is woven here from threads supplied by the classical (Aristotelian) model of politics, participatory democracy, communicative action, practical reason, and critical theory. The product, or so I shall argue, is a coherent, integrative, and attractive program for politics, public policy, and political science.[2]

Dryzek maintains that, over the first centuries, rationality has come to demand two things:

> The first is effective instrumental action; instrumental rationality may be defined in terms of the capacity to devise, select, and effect good means to clarified ends. The second is the idea that [there are] rational choices concerning theories and beliefs about matters of fact, and even about values and morals . . . [3]

This is characteristic of a subkind of democracy that can be overcome by inability to cope with deep change. But there is another characteristic that goes together with the dominance of instrumental rationality, namely what Dryzek calls "objectivism." The representatives of the instrumental rationality "conjure up a clean and orderly world where modern science, technology, and economics flourish. However, I shall argue that modernity also allows some very different possibilities in polity, economy, and society."[4] Dryzek doesn't doubt that there are important subkinds of democracy that will save what is valuable in rationality as opposed to irrationality. There are subkinds of democracy that can help nurture care for nature and that can encourage change to sustainable social practices and economies and that can gauge their progress by shifting from standard of living to quality of life and *all* this implies.

The least radical escape from a democracy where instrumental rationality and objectivism *dominate* is, according to Dryzek, the Popperian open society in which instrumental rationalists can freely criticize one another's designs, and in which objectivists freely criticize one another's theories. But that is not enough.

The most radical escape "repudiates human reason, minimally in some specified domain, but sometimes more universally."[5] It is natural here to think of Paul Feyerabend and his joyful escape from the tyranny of viewing Western science as the only source of knowledge. But Dryzek promotes a third escape route. ". . . discursive and democratic rationality may regulate the remnants of instrumental rationality and replace objectivism."[6] The route goes through participatory democracy to discursive democracy. The first implies substantial strengthening of political communities that govern themselves and downscaling the intervention of representatives. The requirement is to participate also in sustained debates concerning conflicting programs of non-local character. As Dryzek sees it, this goes against the idea of liberal democracy where there is no public interest other than the sum of the interests of individuals. Public communal reasoning toward policy positions via consensus on normative positions moves the quality of decisions to the centre of the debate. The consensus is "on *what* is to be done while differing about *why*."[7]

It is now necessary to introduce another of Dryzek's terms, "discursive design." It is "a social institution around which the expectations of a number of actors converge. . . . a site for recurrent communicative interaction." [8]Participants should be reflectively and discursively free to *override* any rules of procedure.

A concrete issue may make clearer what Dryzek proposes: Take for example the whaling issue: "Actors with a stake in the whaling issue include national governments (both whalers and nonwhalers), environmental groups . . ., aboriginal whalers . . ., commercial whalers, commercial whale watchers, consumers of whale products, scientists . . ., and international organizations such as the IWC and the United Nations." [9]As I understand it, *all* these actors should come together regularly and on equal footing.

Having been active in the whaling issue for ten years, I can confidently say that a meeting of representatives of all the actor groups would be a good thing. The location of a willing, competent, and credible third party, a requirement mentioned by Dryzek, would not pose any problem. Sweden, although opposed to whaling, is nevertheless friendly towards Norway, and would be willing to assist. As to compensation to whalers, the only realistic solution is to guarantee them work in the seas.

I asked Norwegian whalers whether they would accept jobs as inspectors to prevent illegal fishing. There is a great need for enforcement here. It is probable that such an arrangement would have been acceptable to the

whalers in the 1980s, when the plan was aired. However, in political circles it was said to be "politically impossible" to invite whalers to be trained as inspectors. Such special arrangements for particular groups have no precedents. My conclusion: *Discursive design and recurrent communicative interaction would increase the chances of constructive solutions in moderately sharp conflicts, such as that of whaling.* Among the practical obstacles, I should mention, are the costs for all actors to come together to meet in person. In many cases, it would be sufficient to use certain modern non-personal means of close interaction. More generally, my conclusion is that Dryzek points to a largely neglected issue: creative thinking about changing the main features of contemporary kinds of democracy.

What is the chance that present democracies might change and what is the chance that green values will benefit from these changes? In some countries, changes are not improbable. There is a lot of dissatisfaction with existing conditions. But in Norway, as in many other countries, politicians tend to agree that the population is unprepared for significantly more responsible and demanding ecological policies. A great upsurge of participatory democratic activism today might or might not strengthen the urge for such policies. This is not predictable.

Dryzek concludes his book by expressing his conviction that discursive democracy and its development depends upon "critical theory,"[10] and "multifaceted and relentless critique."[11] Here he certainly finds support from people in the deep ecology movement, but less in the environmental movement as a whole. Fortunately, able Green political theorists are gradually making themselves better known. It is my feeling that, as a plain environmental activist, it is important to keep up the interest, to introduce various issues in discussions, to talk about what is gained and what is lost, to encourage people to make use of the opportunities they have to enjoy free nature, and to avoid making still more propaganda for what may be called overwhelmingly exciting nature, that is, places you only reach as tourists. Most people do not have much time to visit such places. They might desire to see them. However, the most firm basis for persistent activism may be a deep need for living in nature that is not dominated by man, however modest its reputation. And if not living there, at least being able to be there sometimes.

I remember when being driven through Tokyo once, that there were endless queues of vehicles, with cement everywhere. But on a nearby vacant lot there was lush vegetation: Dandelions and other flowering plants that are mostly despised. But that characterization is a kind of conventional classification. What was really there was practically an

infinite variety of living beings with the capacity to flourish in an environment of exceptional difficulty, surrounded by square miles of big buildings. Speaking of species and subspecies, there were, of course, many plants there that are unknown to me as a Norwegian. I had a delightful time looking for plants. People seeing me through the windows of their cars could see my delight. In the internationally admired botanical garden in Tokyo, I could not help concentrating on plants looking like my "friends" from childhood in Norway. And yet, I was probably looking at least at subvarieties never seen by me before. There was a hidden otherness: to concentrate on this resulted in sometimes ignoring the extremely rare and strange looking celebrities for which the botanical garden is famous.

What I am driving at here is only to remind us that a *fondness for free nature* can be fostered in children even in our imperfect democracies. Education should be in awareness and feeling as much as in intellectual smartness. In a natural setting some people see hundreds of things more than the average person. If they are used as teachers in natural settings, their very body language reveals their positive emotions for the world. Unfortunately, the selection of teachers is mainly dependent on the higher levels of school administration in a country. I have talked to assemblies of Norwegian teachers and I have insisted that if *they* decide that education must proceed differently, no upper level administration, not even the government itself, could block their efforts. They would succeed! There are not 10,000 teachers available to take over their jobs.

Unfortunately, the motivation for significant changes is not strong enough among the majority of teachers. They complain, but seem to have too much to do within the present regime to organize effective resistance. Resistance! And the government goes primarily for continued economic growth. This in itself could be of value, if it were not understood to imply continued consumerism. The idea is still new or little known that *the measure of economic growth is independent of level of domestic material and energy consumption*. If the growth is three percent, it is compatible with a six percent increase *or decrease* in domestic consumption. A decrease could be caused by large scale co-operation with Third World efforts to overcome the world ecological crisis. For instance, producing a sufficient number of small hydroelectric installations to secure energy supply in Nepal; next, financing the stay of a sufficient number of Norwegians to partake in the proper use of the equipment for the first years; and finally, to instruct the Nepalese on how to start production, using this continuing energy supply, with a higher ecological quality than is now found in Norway. Other nations could do other things that they are good at.

A similar misunderstanding may be present as to level of unemployment. A basic variable is level of labour intensity in the units of work, as opposed to capital intensity. The employment of one more worker in the production of something might require a capital investment of ten thousand or even ten million Norwegian Crowns. The production of aluminum is highly capital intensive in this sense. Whereas hiring a person to look after very old people, who manage imperfectly to live by themselves, may only be the cost of transport and food. Both are examples of economic production, that is, production of goods *and* services.

A democracy with an increased budget devoted to consumption outside its own country, and increased labour intensity, requires some changes in value priorities on the part of a significant percentage of its population. It requires a minority who agree with these goals and are willing to use some of their time to "stand up" and work for their realization. Recent developments have seen an increase of social activism by women. They "stand up" in social conflicts and are on the average less charmed with power gained through directing material production. I am not going into the questions of how to proceed in detail, but point to the likelihood that the kinds of means we use will not generally change our kind of democracy in Norway. We will first change the value priorities within the democracy we have. This will probably be true in many other democracies as well. Even if this is unlikely, the changes, as convincingly described by Dryzek, offer possibilities for major changes in how democracies might work more effectively, especially in relation to ecological responsibility and social justice.

Notes

[1] John S. Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy, and Political Science*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
[2] Dryzek, p. ix.
[3] Ibid., 3–4.
[4] Ibid., 4.
[5] Ibid., 7.
[6] Ibid., 9.
[7] Ibid., 43.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 104.
[10] Ibid., 220.
[11] Ibid., 221.